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ABSTRACT

A study examining factors influencing decisions state legislators make about school finance focuses on votes in Michigan, Missouri, and Washington. Each of these states passed major school finance reform legislation during the 1970's and used open legislative procedures in which individual legislators were free to vote their consciences. Relationships between indicators and votes were not similar across the states. The study found that no single factor determines voting behavior and that success in passing school finance legislation depends on three elements: the political culture, the issue being considered, and the day-to-day legislative context. Traditional education leaders are important in passing complex legislation and so are legislators with new ideas and new approaches. State political culture can contain the new ideas that legislators advance, so that shaping new approaches to the state's political dynamics is essential. A generalization is possible about the ways in which voting behavior differed among the three states. Votes on regulatory issues related to ideological factors; votes on distributive issues related to the size of the transfer to the legislative district. (MD)

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31. The State Legislative Voting Process in Education

The Issue

What factors influence the decisions state legislators make about school finance? On which issues are party loyalties most likely to determine votes and on which issues will constituent pressures most likely prevail? To answer such questions, the Education Governance Center at the Education Commission of the States undertook an 18-month study of voting behavior. The study examined differences across states, across time and across issues. It also explored the role legislative leaders play in developing and passing school finance reform legislation. The study and major results are described below. Then the possible significance of results for other states and possible implications for legislative action are summarized briefly.

Research

The ECS study focused on school finance votes in Michigan, Missouri and Washington. These three states were chosen for several reasons. First, each passed major school finance reform legislation during the mid-1970s. Second, each used

"open" legislative processes in the sense that changes in legislation were often debated on the floor rather than behind closed doors. Third, none of these legislatures operated under binding caucus rules, so individual legislators were free to vote their consciences.

The study allowed comparison of behavior on three different types of votes: (1) votes in three states on major school finance reform (Michigan, Missouri, Washington), (2) votes in Missouri on a school finance reform bill that did not pass in 1975 (HB 350) and one that did pass in 1977 (HB 131), and (3) votes on school legislation and nonschool (health care) legislation (Missouri and Washington).

The study also looked at the positions legislators took on a variety of amendments and complete bills and at legislators who were instrumental in getting legislation enacted. Informed sources in each state rated the importance of the roles played by particular legislators. Characteristics of these legislators and their legislative district were then analyzed to determine if roles and characteristics were systematically related.

The legislation examined dealt with many aspects of school finance. In 1975 Michigan passed SB 110 (the "Bursley Act"), which distributed state aid in proportion to local property tax revenue and added very little money per pupil to the education system. In 1977 Washington passed HB 960 and Missouri passed HB 131, which both sought to provide adequate base funding and increased state aid per pupil. Some votes on these bills or on amendments to them reallocated fixed amounts of money among school districts. Other votes pumped in additional money. Some amendments changed the formula for distributing school funding; others defined how school districts could use money once they received it.

Information gathered in the study was examined quantitatively, using logistic regression analysis of roll call votes on complete bills and amendments; and qualitatively, using interviews with legislators and chief legislative staff. The study focused on legislative activity in the lower chambers.

Votes in Different States

Each state has its own breed of school finance politics. From the metropolitan-outstate split in the Missouri legislature to labor-management politics in Michigan, standard political indicators are modified by each state's individual political culture. The result is major differences not only in the policy formation process but also

in the factors that influence the process. When the Michigan legislature considered school finance legislation in 1973, legislators tended to vote with their political party rather than for the economic self-interest of their districts. In Missouri, however, legislators were strongly aware of district interests, and the rural/urban coalition that passed HB 131 was forged in spite of party ties. It seems to have been easier for legislators to perceive economic self-interest or to forge a new coalition if sufficiently large increments of new money were added to the system, as was the case in Missouri. Yet in Washington, which struggled to change its school finance system in 1977, the legislature was able to limit the definition of basic education even though money for education was not yet a problem.

Differences in political culture and political process meant that relationships between indicators and votes were not exactly similar across states. That is, there seems to be no single set of theoretical factors that clearly determines votes in every legislative roll call situation.

Votes at Different Times

In 1977 the Missouri House of Representatives passed legislation that was directly traceable to the 1975 school finance reform effort in that body. The 1975 bill died in the Missouri Senate because it was perceived as being pro-metropolitan: if a new school finance system was to be adopted, it would have to appeal to a broader coalition of legislators. The 1975 package was therefore revised and resubmitted in 1977, a process that gained considerable momentum from Governor Bond's appointment of a state Conference on Education and from a court challenge of the school finance system.

Many of the ideas adopted in 1977 were also proposed in 1975, yet there were important differences. Consistent across the two bills were the manner in which pupils were counted, the weighting factors included in the aid formula, the method of computing foundation aid and the requirements placed on local school districts for spending on teachers' salaries. Deleted between 1975 and 1977 were equalizing local assessments; added were a guaranteed tax base add-on provision and an income factor adjustment to the property wealth provision. As the 1977 legislative package developed, so did the rural/urban coalition that eventually passed the measure.

Cross-Issue Comparisons

Votes on school finance legislation were generally votes on these three types of proposals: amendments to the main

legislation that redistributed funds differently from previous allocations, amendments that added regulatory guidelines to the tasks performed by local school districts and votes on the entire legislative package.

Votes on amendments to alter the flow of funds were related to indicators of economic self-interest with striking frequency. Although state legislators typically must work with relatively little information, they nonetheless collected enough information to define their districts' self-interest: when an advantage was to be gained in the school finance reform process, legislators knew what it was. Their ability to determine economic interest was especially evident in the votes on the Taller and Fancher amendment in Washington (declining enrollment adjustment), the votes on the cost index and on increasing minimum revenue in Missouri, and the vote on the third Bryant amendment in Michigan (special education).

A distinctly different set of variables consistently explained votes on regulatory amendments (e.g., the votes in Washington to expand the definition of basic education, and the vote in Missouri on school district spending limits for teacher salaries). **Votes on these matters tended to relate to ideological factors, like political party and median-income models.**

Votes on the adoption of complete packages followed two distinct patterns. In Michigan, where the legislature changed the method for delivering state aid to school districts but did not substantially increase total aid, the major influences were ideological: political party was the major factor determining preliminary votes on the legislation and the median income of legislators' districts was more influential in the final vote. Economic self-interest and interest groups played a negligible role in the outcome. Yet in Missouri and Washington, the final votes on total packages tended to be more strongly motivated by economic self-interest than by ideological factors.

The votes analyzed on nonschool legislation, specifically on certificate-of-need legislation in health care, were related to economic self-interest and to ideology, with self-interest tending to dominate. It seems that when legislation raises significant winner and loser considerations legislators will gather enough information to determine whether their districts will win or lose and then vote accordingly. In a broader sense, it seems that when legislation has significant economic consequences ideology does not determine voting behavior.

Differences Between Voting Behavior and Policy Leadership

Although voting on school finance relates closely to the interests of a legislator's district and his or her own political affiliations, the likelihood that a legislator will be a policy leader seems, for various reasons, completely unrelated to district characteristics.

The present study confirms the finding by Rosenthal and Fuhrman in Legislative Education Leadership (1981) that policy leadership in education emanates from both the substantive committees and the money committees of state legislatures. But it raises questions about their finding that tenure is a determinant of policy leadership. In two instances, the length of time legislators served in the legislature was unrelated to leadership; in two other instances, it related only weakly.

Two different types of policy leaders seem essential to the passage of school finance reform legislation, education policy specialists (that is, state education leaders), and legislators who contribute new ideas or new coalition-building skills. Without the help of both types of leaders, reform legislation would not have been enacted in Michigan, Missouri or Washington, where state education leaders used the "new ideas" legislators to fashion a package to meet the requirements of the full legislature. Education leaders seem to emerge after making a long-term commitment to the development of education policy; "new ideas" legislators rise to leadership in more serendipitous ways.

So, although voting behavior depends on the benefits to districts and on the political roots of legislators, **the development of legislation depends on different factors -- on a combination of traditional leadership and new ideas.**

Significance of Results for Other States

Applying the results of a study of three states to all states is in some ways impossible or inappropriate, given the diversity of state politics in America. Further, the study itself did not produce a monolithic set of factors that always explained voting behavior even in these three states. But there are two ways in which the significance of the results can perhaps be generalized.

The first way derives from the conclusions Daniel Elazar drew in American Federalism (1972) about political culture in all 50 states. Elazar defined three types of political culture and then classified states according to which type or types of culture predominate. He found that the political culture

of Michigan resembles political cultures in Vermont, Maine, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Colorado, Utah and Oklahoma. The political culture of Washington is in the same category as New Hampshire, Iowa, Montana, Kansas, South Dakota, California and Idaho; the political culture of Missouri is in a category with Delaware, Maryland and Hawaii. Findings of the ECS study of Michigan, Missouri and Washington could, then, contribute to understanding legislative processes in other states Elazar placed in the same categories.

Generalizations may also be possible about the ways in which voting behavior differs on regulatory amendments and on amendments that distribute funds to school districts. Behavior differed consistently in the instances ECS studied: **votes on regulatory issues consistently related to ideological factors such as political party, whereas votes on distributive issues consistently related to the size of the transfer to the legislative district.**

Implications for Legislative Action

- No single factor determines voting behavior across states, or even within states on various aspects of the same issue. There is no simple solution for the legislative leader interested in building a coalition to enact complex school finance legislation. Success in passing school finance legislation depends on three major elements: (1) the political culture in which the legislature operates; (2) the issue being considered; and (3) the day-to-day legislative context (e.g., interpersonal relationships between legislators, activities of interest groups).

- Two types of policy leadership are required to pass complex school finance legislation. Traditional education leaders play a vital role, but so do legislators with new ideas or new approaches.

- State political culture constrains the new ideas that legislators advance. Shaping new approaches to the political dynamics of the state is essential for the creators of new ideas and for traditional leaders.

What to Read

Elazar, D. J. American Federalism, 2nd ed. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1972.

Rosenthal, Alan and Susan Fuhrman. Legislative Education Leadership in the States. Washington, DC: The Institute for Education Leadership, 1981.

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